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Social Crisis in Contemporary Ukraine In Search of a New Narrative

On August 24, 2016, Ukraine celebrated the 25th anniversary of gaining independence. Despite the fact that this country is very young, Ukrainians have existed as an ethnic group for many centuries. They lived on the territories that belonged to different countries at different times, including The Russian Empire, Poland, The Austro-Hungarian Empire, Hungary, and Romania. Now, Ukraine is one of the largest countries in Europe with the area of 603,500 m² and population of approximately 42 million people. It would seem that a country which eventually received the long-awaited independence ought to have responsibility to build a strong united society in order to protect its sovereignty, but that did not happen in the 1990s. Neither did it happen in the next decade. On the contrary, Ukraine faced several political and economic crises that, in turn, caused the societal crisis that continues to harm Ukraine and its people.

In 1993, Professor Volodymyr Lanoviy, who was the Minister of Economy of Ukraine, wrote: "I am sick and tired of hearing political leaders say 'We are just beginning, we are trying to learn how to steer Ukraine out of political crisis'" (Lanoviy 1993: 194). It turned out that this task has become too complicated for him and other politicians. Instead of uniting the country by introducing a common narrative of national identity, several very different narratives started to emerge in the 1990s, and now they stand in the way of peaceful and stable development of Ukraine.

At first, there were two major narratives – pro-Ukrainian and pro-Soviet (pro-Russian). As Lanoviy wrote in 1993, "in the West of Ukraine, the popularity of the national socialists is growing rapidly and the republicans are losing the confidence of the population. In the East of Ukraine, the authority and prestige of communism is on the rise" (Lanoviy 1993: 194). It should not be surprising that such polarization of the Ukrainian society took place very shortly after the country had declared independence. In the academic literature, there have already been many studies proving that sharp economic declines have negative influence on people's preferences with regard to existing economic and political

system (De Haas et al. 2008: 94). In the early 1990s, an economic crisis harshly hit Ukraine, because its economy lost valuable economic ties with Russia and other countries to which manufacturing enterprises exported their products. Additionally, the planned economy had to be transformed into the market economy, and it was not a simple task for Ukraine which had been one of the key Soviet Republics in terms of industrial production and agriculture. Some large monocities, especially in the east of Ukraine, in the Donbass region, were built in the Soviet times and were a vital node of a complex production network. In the 1990s, they had to learn how to survive. Without doubt, the economic and social shock must have had great impact on people's views and a lot of people wanted to regain the relative stability that used to prevail in the USSR, even in the 1980s, during the volatile years of Perestroika.

In the case of Ukraine, it is of great interest to the author of this article, to investigate further why people in different parts of Ukraine view similar economic and political problems differently and why there is no unity in the Ukrainian society, despite the fact that the majority of people in Ukraine, which is equal to 77 per cent, are ethnic Ukrainians. Some scholars write that not only economic problems, but also cultural differences may cause a conflict (cited in De Haas et al.: 94). Therefore, it is worth focusing on whether the cultural differences between Western and Eastern Ukraine are so sharp that they do not allow a large east-European country to develop further. In this article, several key differences will be described and the most popular narratives of national identity will be presented. Statistical data from various sources and extensive literature review will show that regional differences play a much more important role in spreading the societal crisis in Ukraine than belonging to a certain ethnic group or speaking Ukrainian or Russian language. Finally, it will be suggested that the ineffective post-Soviet approach to governance, as well as the power of several business groups during the first twenty years of Ukrainian independence were some of the major factors of the fundamental societal crisis that later resulted in the annexation of Crimea by Russia, and a military conflict in some parts of the Donbass region, on the border with Russia.

To start with, Karácsonyi et al. (2014) described a large number of differences between Eastern and Western Ukraine in the article "East–West Dichotomy and Political Conflict in Ukraine – Was Huntington Right?" In the authors' opinion, the dichotomy was caused by ethnic and religious differences, level of urbanization, level of economic development, national identity, etc. These differences have been shaped for several centuries along the Uman'–Kharkiv line. For instance, in the 19th and 20th centuries, eastern Ukrainian regions went through the process of rapid industrialization that made them dependent on the Russian economy. Uneven industrialization also led to the divide between the urban and rural Ukraine. Karácsonyi et al. (2014) write that 65 per cent of rural citizens live in the western part of Ukraine, whereas almost 80 per cent of the population lives

in the cities in the east of Ukraine (Karácsonyi et al. 2014: 120). Once again, this is because settlements in the east are not as old as the settlements in the west of the country. For example, large cities in the east of Ukraine were founded as follows: Kharkiv – 1650, Donetsk – 1869, Luhansk – 1795, Odessa – 1794, Dnepropetrovsk – 1776. As for the major cities in the west of Ukraine: Lviv – 1240, Ivano-Frankovsk – 1650, Ternopol – 1540, Chernivtsi – 1408. The same trend concerns smaller towns. If in the eastern part of Ukraine many monocities were built during the period of industrialization, the settlement network in the west of Ukraine was formed in the course of several centuries that preceded industrialization (Karácsonyi et al. 2014: 120).

When Ukraine was united under the rule of the Soviet Union, there were some common centralized policies, but they did not erase regional differences. Moreover, some policies, for example, migration policy, led to the rebalancing of ethnic groups in Ukrainian cities. In eastern Ukraine, the number of people of Russian origin significantly increased, because a lot of workers were coming to eastern Ukrainian cities in order to build new factories and plants. Moreover, a large number of Ukrainians died during the Holodomor and World War II, or were made to migrate to other countries. In western Ukraine, there were also significant migrations. After World War II, ethnic Poles had to move to Poland and ethnic Ukrainians that lived in Poland moved back to Ukraine. For example, in Lviv in 1939, 50 per cent of the population was Polish, and only 15 per cent of the population was Ukrainian (Mick 2011: 2). During World War II, the city quickly became a vital cultural, historic, and industrial center for Ukrainians. Additionally, the USSR was trying to integrate Lviv and other western Ukrainian cities into the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. After several decades, 88 per cent of the population in Lviv was Ukrainian, 9 per cent was Russian, and only 1 per cent was Polish (Ukrainian Census of 2001).

The most visible cultural differences in Ukraine are language and religion. According to the Ukrainian Census of 2001, 14.8 per cent of ethnic Ukrainians think that Russian is their native language. Considering the information about migration provided above, it is not surprising at all that the number of ethnic Ukrainians who speak Russian is significantly higher in the eastern regions of Ukraine. Up to 60 per cent of ethnic Ukrainians in Donetsk, Luhansk, and Crimea think that Russian is their native language (cited in Karácsonyi et al. 2014: 115). In general, Ukrainian language has the state status and is protected by the Ukrainian Constitution that was passed in 1996. Other languages, Russian, Crimean Tatar, Polish, Hungarian, and Romanian in particular, are used for communication by the ethnic minorities that live in different parts of Ukraine. Without doubt, Russian language is the most widely spread. Very often the topic of oppression of the Russian-speaking Ukrainians and ethnic Russians is used by some local politicians, as well as by the Russian government, in order to get political mileage in Ukraine and abroad.

In terms of religion, there are many more believers in the western regions than in the eastern ones – 86.6 per cent versus 50.5 per cent. Such a difference may be explained by the fact that the Soviet Union was not so aggressive in the western Ukraine that joined the USSR only after World War II (Karácsonyi et al. 2014: 115). Additionally, there are more Catholics in the west than in the east. Finally, in order to understand the division in the Ukrainian society in terms of religion, it is important to mention that there are two competing Orthodox Churches in Ukraine. There are churches that belong either to the Kyiv Patriarchate or the Moscow Patriarchate. According to the official data provided by the Ministry of Culture of Ukraine, two thirds of the Orthodox churches belong to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate). In turn, there are half as many churches that belong to the Kyiv Patriarchate (Ministry of Culture of Ukraine, 2016). Paradoxically, the majority of Orthodox people in Ukraine support the Kyiv Patriarchate (Razumkov Centre, 2016).

The discrepancy in the number of churches may have been caused by two factors. The Kyiv Patriarchate was established in 1992 and it is unrecognized by the canonical Orthodox churches at the international level. Thus, it is difficult to create an extensive network of churches around the country even though there is the public will to do that. Secondly, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate has very strong support from the Russian Orthodox Church and influential pro-Russian Ukrainian politicians. There have been appeals in Ukraine, initiated by the pro-western Presidents Viktor Yushchenko and Petro Poroshenko, to create a unified Ukrainian Church, but it seems that at the moment, this idea is not feasible due to the evident absence of consensus between the two dominant churches.

One more important difference lies in the way Ukrainians view democracy and free market economy in different parts of the country. People who live in the east of Ukraine are 35 per cent less likely to support the market-based economic system, and 42 per cent less likely to be in favor of democracy (De Haas et al. 2015: 93). What is more, the negative views concerning democracy and market economy arose in the east of Ukraine in 2006–2010, due to the economic crisis that Ukraine had to overcome (De Haas et al. 2015: 93). In 2000–2010, the economic situation did not significantly improve, mainly because “institutionalized oligarchic capital and clannish power took hold and society became divided into the super wealthy and the poor” (Kuzio 2011: 95). Moreover, Ukraine continued to rest on the conservative Soviet governance structures and ideologies that did not allow active participation of citizens in the national and regional politics (Korostelina 2013: 39). Both power of the oligarchs and Soviet ideology are much stronger in the east of Ukraine, where many large industrial companies are located. Due to the inconsistencies in the economic system and political governance model, it is not surprising that people in the east of Ukraine, in the Donbas region in particular, are more dissatisfied with the national government,

and therefore, would like to have closer ties with Russia, in order to reconstruct the past when the cities in Soviet Ukraine were benefiting from central planning and extensive economic cooperation with Russia.

Information that was provided above shows that the Ukrainian society is indeed diverse and there are regional differences that may have a negative impact on the current development of the country. For example, in 2014, after the end of Euromaidan and the escape of President of Ukraine – Victor Yanukovych – to Russia, Russia was relying on the narrative of oppression of Russian coethnics in the east of Ukraine and Crimea (Metzger et al. 2016: 21). Interestingly, during Euromaidan, the narrative was different and it concerned the question whether Ukraine should be integrating into the European Union or not. Yuri Zhukov from the University of Michigan states that it would be wrong to “associate terms like ‘pro-Russian’ and ‘pro-Ukrainian’ only with the ethnic and linguistic groups that bear their name” (Zhukov 2015: 2). He provides an example of the region of Donbas where the rebels look in the direction of Russia not because of their ethnicity or language. In his opinion, maintaining close trade ties with Russia is one of the main reasons why some people in Donbas are acting against the Ukrainian government (Zhukov 2015: 2). Barrington and Herron (2004) also think that very different ethnic groups in Ukraine can coexist peacefully, and they call the phenomenon “the dogs that didn’t bark” (Barrington & Herron 2004: 4).

However, there might be doubts that this phenomenon could be observed in Ukraine starting from 2004, after the end of the Orange Revolution that brought a pro-western politician, Victor Yushchenko, to power. There were no direct conflicts between people until 2014, but the tension in the political circles was rising. President Yushchenko was probably the first president in the independent Ukraine that tried to deconstruct Soviet mentality. He raised the topic of Holodomor as another holocaust, and of World War II in which Ukraine suffered not only from the Nazi Germany, but also from the USSR. However, President Yushchenko quickly lost his popularity due to the political crisis. In the next elections a pro-Russian politician, Viktor Yanukovych, became the President of Ukraine. Under his rule, there was a very rapid return to the simulated democracy and the further weakening of the Ukrainian economy as well as the whole political system (Korostelina 2013: 41).

The shift between ideologies in Ukraine may be explained by the presence of very different narratives of national identity. For instance, Korostelina (n.d.) provides six types of narratives of national identity: dual identity; being pro-Soviet; a fight for Ukrainian identity; recognition of Ukrainian identity; a multicultural-civic narrative; and a Crimean Tatars’ narrative (Korostelina n.d.: 7). Each narrative has a very strong logical basis and may contradict other narratives. Therefore, one narrative cannot be dominant in Ukraine. In addition, a compromise between some narratives is difficult if not impossible to achieve.

Korostelina (n.d.) writes that the dual identity narrative is applied to describe Ukraine as a state “with a dual identity of two equal ethnic groups” (Korostelina n.d.: 7). People who support this narrative may be proud of their Russian heritage and think that it is the nationalists who caused the tension in the Ukrainian society. In their opinion, different regions have very different histories and therefore, it is difficult to develop a common national identity (Korostelina n.d.: 7). People who support the pro-Soviet narrative would like to change the overall opinion about the USSR and recognize both positive and negative aspects of the Soviet past. They think that Ukraine should develop a multicultural society and avoid one-sided interpretation of history (Korostelina n.d.: 7).

The Fight for Ukrainian Identity narrative is based on the idea that Ukraine has “a post-colonial, post-genocidal society that was able to survive, preserve culture and language, and achieve independence” (Korostelina n.d.: 7). Those people who support this narrative think that the country is facing a threat from the pro-Soviet or pro-Russian population, and from the politicians that are supported by Russia. For them it is important to protect Ukrainian democratic values and discredit all the pro-Soviet totalitarian ideals (Korostelina n.d.: 8).

The Recognition of Ukrainian Identity narrative describes Ukraine as a country in which society should be united by the democratic Ukrainian culture, as a substitute for the Soviet totalitarian regime. According to this narrative, it seems that the tensions in the Ukrainian society were caused by manipulations initiated by Russia and do not have any real bases. Therefore, Ukraine should protect itself from Russian influences in all spheres of life (Korostelina n.d.: 8).

The multicultural civic narrative is based on the idea that the Ukrainian society should have a civic meaning of national identity and “reflect multiple voices of Ukrainian history” (Korostelina n.d.: 8). Finally, the narrative of Crimean Tatars supports Ukrainian independence. People favoring this narrative think that pro-Russian forces divided Ukraine. Moreover, they think that Ukrainians should have a more positive approach towards the ethnic group of Crimean Tatars (Korostelina n.d.: 8).

What could be the possible scenarios for Ukraine based on the narratives provided above? Andrew Wilson from the University College in London thinks that rapid Ukrainization will probably not occur in Ukraine, because there is quite a large group of people – up to 30–35 per cent of the total population – who consider themselves Russian speaking ethnical Ukrainians (cited in Popson 2011). These people are very different and may have unlike views about Ukrainian culture, history, economic, and political prospects. Starting from 2014, one can observe that some people in this group, who live in Donbass, support the rebels that fight against Ukraine. Wilson suggests three main scenarios for Ukraine: a state that is like Canada, “with own Russophone or Ukrainian Quebec,” gradual Ukrainization and consolidation of the society, or continuation of the conflict between the overlapping identities (cited in Popson 2011).

However, no matter which scenario will turn out to be true for Ukraine, it is important for the government to implement reforms in all spheres, in order to resolve the accumulated problems and prevent the further development of this “failed state.” International organizations and foreign governments assist Ukraine in introducing the reforms. One of them, which is likely to reduce the tension in Ukraine, is a so-called decentralization reform. There are two main aims of this reform: to improve governance and budgeting at the local level, and to shift responsibility from the national level to the local level. Additionally, decentralization is an alternative to federalization that was promoted by Russia during the peace talks that concerned the situation in the Donbass region. Ukraine is using the model that was applied by Poland in the 1990s. If the decentralization reform is implemented as it has been planned, the risk of the potential conflict between the regions and the center will be low.

Conclusion

The formation of a united prosperous country is always incredibly complex and depends on many factors. In terms of Ukraine, it turned out that the country, unlike the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, failed to cope with the economic crisis and formation of the new governance system that would not rely on the Soviet meaning of power. Additionally, the issue of national identity became one of the most debatable topics in Ukraine. It is connected with very different narratives that for many years co-existed peacefully. “The dogs that didn’t bark” phenomenon ended in 2004 when the Orange Revolution started. Since then, it has been clear that people can be divided not only by their pro-European or pro-Russian sympathies. There are much more complex issues that may divide people. Some historical issues, including the role of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army in the Ukrainian history, or the positive and negative sides of the Soviet Ukraine, are the topics that do not bring consensus to the Ukrainian society. What is more, there are several regional differences that include language, religion, level of urbanization, ethnicity, and opinions about the market or planned economies, which make creation of a common narrative of national identity a difficult task.

Nevertheless, one could observe the will of Ukrainian people to fight for their country in 2014, when Crimea was annexed by Russia. At the moment, Ukrainian government as well as the civil society receive support from their international partners and therefore, there are structural reforms and public discussions which raise controversial issues that have been suppressed for many years. It is not clear yet which scenario Ukraine will choose for staying united. It is likely that Ukraine will continue its gradual Ukrainization, and balancing interests of different regions by means of decentralization, which has already

started, will last for several years until the conflict in the Donbass region is resolved. Now, there is a common understanding in Ukraine that it is important to avoid becoming a “failed state,” and therefore a lot of severe transformations have to take place. To sum up, the way people and the government will view history, culture, and diversity in the Ukrainian society will define the future scenario of the development of Ukraine.

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